Infinity and New Phenomenology

In Dialogue with László Tengelyi and Nicholas of Cusa[1]

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1. Introduction

At first sight nothing can stand further apart than a contemporary secular philosopher and a fifteenth century cardinal of the Roman Church. The late László Tengelyi (1954–2014) was a professor of philosophy, an insightful and creative interpreter of works from the phenomenological tradition – i.e. Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas and many others –, while Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464), who notably refused twice university professorship, was active in (church) politics instead, and at the same time proved to be a prolific author of works belonging to Neo-Platonic intellectual mysticism. Yet, beyond the mere fact that the former seriously studied the latter's thought,[2] there exists a deeper connection between these two thinkers, one that can be truly called phenomenological. It is the aim of the present paper to demonstrate – in the phenomenological sense – this connection.[3]

Therefore, I shall introduce my discussion with the help of some of Tengelyi's phenomenological insights and then will briefly look at infinity in contemporary French phenomenology, while my second section is dedicated to an examination of some Cusanian works. The third section is my attempt at a phenomenological evaluation of the Cusanian project, while in the closing section I will reflect on the possibility of *philosophical humility*. As I hope to make it clear, an alternative title of my paper could also be "*On the humility of philosophy and the philosophy of humility*".

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1 This paper is an extended written version of my presentation at the conference *"Horizons Beyond Borders. Traditions and Perspectives of the Phenomenological Movement in Central and Eastern Europe"* June 17–19th 2015, Budapest, Hungary.
Herewith I should like to express my gratitude to Mark Webb, Anna Christina Soy Ribeiro and Jonathan Dorsey at The College of Arts and Sciences of Texas Technical University, in Lubbock, Texas who made my stay there possible in the spring of 2015. I am especially grateful to Professor Dorsey and their library staff for helping me to track down some of László Tengelyi's articles.
While this present paper has originally been composed in English, my earlier reflection, written in Hungarian on the relationship between Cusanus and phenomenology is to be published in the following volume: *A vallásfilozófia új útjai*. Szent István Társulat, Budapest, 2016. In spite of the same central topic and a considerable overlap in the material discussed, the Hungarian version and this English paper are markedly different.

2 Cf. e.g. Tengelyi László: On Absolute Infinity in Cantor, in Dermot Moran – Hans Reiner Sepp (eds.), *Phenomenology 2010*. Volume 4 Selected Essays from Northern Europe. Traditions, Transitions and Challenges (Bucharest: Zeta Books, 2010) pp. 529–550. I have recently learnt from Mrs. Tengelyi, philosopher herself that her husband had even written one of his theses on Cusanus.

3 My entrance into phenomenology owes much to Tengelyi's book *Élettörténet és sorsesemény* [Life History and Event] published in Hungarian in 1998 and also his *Tapasztalat* és *kifejezés* [Experience and Expression] in 2007, for an (extended and rewritten) English version of the former see his *"The Wild Region in Life-History"*, Northwestern University Press, Evenston, 2004.

2. Tengelyi and new phenomenology

Tengelyi certainly agrees with Husserlian phenomenology on its two basic tenets: phenomenology begins with the experience of the subject, i.e. the first person singular, while its aim is discovering structures and contexts of meanings. A basic difference, however, that sets Tengelyi apart from classical phenomenology is his fundamental conviction that the source of these meanings does not exclusively lie in the subject's own activity. Meanings are not simply constituted by the subjects alone.

Instead, Tengelyi calls for a radically renewed and reformed or—in his terminology—*diacritic phenomenology*.[4] He never ceases to emphasize his basic insight according to which *experience* is about something new, something surprising. A (new) meaning is always being born out of a *non-controllable reality*. Consequently, the *world* cannot be a self-contained whole, instead it stands *radically open*. As the late Husserl himself formulated it in the following question:

> "Does the 'infinity' of the world, instead of referring to a transfinite endlessness (as if the world were something finished in itself, an all-encompassing thing or a self-enclosed collectivity of things, which would nevertheless contain in itself an infinity of things), not rather mean an 'openness'?" [5]

One can also say that the *infinite richness* of experiencing objects and the world with its infinite possibilities of self-revealing is comparable to an *unpredictable ocean*. Thus, the infinity the Hungarian philosopher speaks about is certainly a *dynamic* kind of infinity.[6] Clearly, for him, thinking, that is to say philosophizing itself is also a special kind of experience.

While *experience* and *expression* are equally important for *diacritic phenomenology*, the *diacritic phenomenology of religious experience* can be called a road for the most part not taken. Thanks to his extensive reading Tengelyi is certainly aware of the theological dimensions of both phenomenology in general and infinity in particular, nevertheless, generally he seems to be somewhat rel-

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4 As he himself acknowledges, the term *diacritic* comes from Merleau-Ponty, who in turn takes it from Saussure. Cf. László Tengelyi, "*The Wild Region in Life-History",* op. cit., pp. xxvii–xxx, where he contrasts his way of thinking to Hegelian dialectic and traditional phenomenology. The philosophical term originates in Greek *diakrinein* (to distinguish, to divide, to separate) and refers to separating conceptually two aspects of being holding a differential relationship.

5 Edmund Husserl, *Ideen einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Zweites Buch Phänomenologische Untersuchungen zur Konstitution* (Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1952) p. 299: *"Besagt die »Unendlichkeit« der Welt statt einer transfiniten Unendlichkeit (als ob die Welt ein in sich fertig seiendes, ein allumfassendes Ding oder abgeschlossenen Kollektivum von Dingen wäre, das aber eine Unendlichkeit von Dingen in sich enthalte), besagt sie nicht vielmehr eine »Offenheit«?"* I am grateful to my friend, Péter Sárkány, who made me possible to access this work.
The English translation is quoted from László Tengelyi, "Agonistic World Projects: Transcendentalism Versus Naturalism", *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy,* Volume 27, 2013/3, pp. 236–252, here p. 248. While the exact nature of this "openness" is left open in Husserl's text, one can argue that Tengelyi's project aims exactly at offering an answer to Husserl's question: *"Aber was soll damit gemeint sein?"* On the very same page in the previous paragraph Husserl speaks of the *"open essence" (ein offenes Wesen)* of a thing and finishes with the following question: *"Aber das ist das Problem, den* Sinn dieser Offenheit *[...] zu präzisieren."* (Author's emphasis)

6 In several of his works, Tengelyi distinguishes between *transfinite* and *absolute* infinity, cf. my footnote 2 and also section 3 in my paper. On the problem of infinity and the world cf. his posthumous work: László Tengelyi, *Welt und Unendlichkeit. Zum Problem phänomenologischer Metaphysik* (Freiburg/München: Verlag Karl Alber, 2014) on the transfinite and openness see especially pp. 435–548. Page 545 clearly states: *"Husserl verwirft die Gleichsetzung der Welt mit einem in sich fertigem und allumfassendem Ding ebenso wie mit einem abgeschlossenen Kollektivum der Dinge."* Tengelyi's own diacritic phenomenology stands certainly for a dynamization [German *Dynamisierung*] of the infinite. I am grateful to Bence Marosán who made me possible to access this book.

uctant to follow this path any further.[7] As he clearly states: *"With infinity beyond the thing and the world has a diacritic phenomenology as such nothing to do. Its task is solely to grasp* the infinite of this world."[8] He even goes on to say that: *"the infinity of the world is not equal to the absolutely infinite. Rather it is an open infinity, one that perhaps lays the basis to every kind of religious tradition, without, however, ever being able to be encapsulated by any of those in its entirety."*[9]

This last claim is especially interesting, for a number of reasons. First, in Georg Cantor's and Husserl's footsteps Tengelyi does not only clearly differentiates between the infinite of the world and God's infinity, but in typical phenomenological fashion he leaves open the question of the exact nature of their mutual relationships. Secondly, although he seems to be aware of their importance, Tengelyi here does not take upon himself the task of investigating or evaluating any of the religious traditions. Thirdly, he carefully makes the rather humble claim that the infinite openness of the world may be fundamental to our understanding of religion.[10] Finally, he also clearly differentiates between phenomenology and religion, that is to say, between the infinite of the world as studied in phenomenology and as experienced and interpreted through religion.

It might be pointed out that this last difference is again and perhaps not surprisingly of a *diacritic* kind. For Tengelyi the two infinities—that of the world and that of God—appear to be at once different and as having an intimate relationship. Furthermore, it can be added that the *diacritic* relationship between experience and expression itself calls for an extension to the examination of phenomena such as narrative experience and sacred texts of religions, openness and prophetic experience, positive and negative theology – just to name a few.[11]

It is a well-known fact that Immanuel Kant attributed to the idea of infinity an exclusively regulative function and denied to it any objective content.[12] Yet, in Kant's philosophical aftermath infinity has had a real come back. This is especially true in twentieth century French phenomenology.[13]

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7 See, for example, László Tengelyi, "On the Border of Phenomenology and Theology", in Jonna Bornemark, Hans Ruin (eds.), *Phenomenology and Religion: New Frontiers* (Huddinge: Södertörn University, 2010) pp. 17–34.

8 László Tengelyi, *Welt und Unendlichkeit,* op. cit. p. 548: *"Mit einem Unendlichen jenseits von Ding und Welt hat eine diakritische Phänomenologie als solche nichst zu tun. Ihr kommt es einzig und allein darauf an,* das Unendliche dieser Welt *zu erfassen."* (Author's emphasis, my translation)

9 Ibid., p. 556: *"Aber das Unendliche der Welt ist nicht das Absolutunendliche. Es ist vielmehr ein offenenes Unendliches, das vielleicht jeder Überlieferung religiöser Art zugrunde liegt, sich aber in keine von ihnen jemals ganz einschliessen lässt."*

10 This is all the more significant since the previous paragraph states the following: *"jedes Gottesverhältnis des Menschen letzlich aus der Wahrnehmung des Unendlichen der Welt auswächst."* Ibid.

11 In my reading Merleau-Ponty's following words seem to have already opened up this possibility: *"Should the starting-point for the understanding of history be ideology, or politics, or religion, or economics? [...] All these views are true provided that they are not isolated, that we delve deeply into history and reach the unique core of existential meaning which emerges in each perspective."* See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978) *Preface,* p. xix. I shall come back to the question of a (diacritic) phenomenology of religion when evaluating Cusanus' thought from a phenomenological perspective in section 3.

12 Cf. László Tengelyi, "Experience and Infinity in Kant and Husserl", *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie,* (67/3) 2005/3, pp. 479–500. It is worth noting that before turning to phenomenology Tengelyi studied Kant, and he even published a monograph on Kant's philosophy. (See László Tengelyi, *Kant* (Budapest: Áron, 1995.) The thinker from Königsberg has always remained one of Tengelyi's interests. Tengelyi himself confessed: *"I have two interests stemming from the problem of infinity. The first is an attempt to unite or connect my two main interests, namely, Kant and phenomenology. [...] On the other hand, this threefold interest in Kant, Husserl, and Cantor is also integrated within my project on a new phenomenology in France. [...] it is connected with an attempt to develop phenomenology as a new kind of first philosophy. This is the main project of Marion, which, I believe, must be taken seriously but should be interpreted modestly".* See Niall Kean, Vincent Wargo (eds.), "Interview with Professor Tengelyi", *The Leuven Philosophy Newsletter,* volume 14, 2005, pp. 47–54, quote on p.49.

13 As a significant part of his essays makes it clear—in contributions discussing but also further developing the thought of Jean-Paul Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur, Michel Henry, Marc Richir—contemporary French phenomenology was an important field for Tengelyi's research. In 2005 he

According to Emmanuel Levinas infinity in a certain sense can be experienced in the *face of the Other*.[14] As Bettina Bergo puts it:

> ”insofar as Infinity means the not-finite, it refers to the unmasterable quality of human expression. So far as Infinity has a positive sense, then it has the affective qualities of desire for sociality, and of joy. Thus, Infinity, before we interpret it as “God” or reify it as a highest being, is a quotidian event that takes place at the sensuous-affective level, and repeats.”[15]

Thus for Levinas it is the ethical experience that gives us phenomenal indication of the Infinite. The experience of *life* plays a similar role for Michel Henry, while Jean-Luc Marion refers to the experience of the *invisible*. Although clearly in different concepts and phenomena, all of these three thinkers seem to point toward the infinite. Even at first sight Infinity, Life, and the Invisible are – at least (partly) – coextensive concepts. Certainly all three lie beyond Husserlian phenomenology as well as beyond a neutral theoretical attitude. Interestingly enough already for Edmund Husserl the finite and the infinite belonged together.[16] Notably, for him phenomenology necessarily held a relation to the infinite.[17]

3. Infinity in Nicholas of Cusa’s works

3.1. De docta ignorantia (1440)

As Tengelyi was himself aware, Husserl’s differentiation between two basic kinds of infinite came from the mathematician Georg Cantor.[18] Cantor’s own distinction was at least foreshadowed conceptually in Nicholas of Cusa’s famous *De docta ignorantia*.[19] While for Cusanus the world is *interminatum, privative infinitum*, i.e. having no definable borders and privatively infinite, God is truly Infinite, i.e. *interminabilis, infinitum*.[20] Although the world is finite, its boundaries cannot be fixed

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made the following statement: *“My present research concerns what you could describe as the new phenomenology in France, a phenomenology that has been developed over the last two decades. The main problem here, formulated by Jean-Luc Marion, is the search for a third form of phenomenology, which is different both from Husserl’s and Heidegger’s approaches. The main thesis developed by Marion is that there is a third form of phenomenology scattered over the landscape of French thought since the 60ies.”* See Niall Kean, Vincent Wargo (eds), *”Interview with Professor Tengelyi”,* op.cit., p. 48.
An important fruit of this research in this respect is Hans-Dieter Gondek, László Tengelyi (eds.), *Neue Phänomenologie in Frankreich* (Berlin: Surhkamp, 2011) – a book I was not able to access while writing the present paper. For a much shorter overview see László Tengelyi, “New Phenomenology in France”, *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 50, Issue 2 (2012), pp. 295–303.

14 See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity. An Essay in Exteriority* (The Hague/Boston/London: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979).

15 Bettina Bergo, “Emmanuel Levinas”, in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2015 Edition, URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/levinas/>. Cf. also László Tengelyi, “Experience of Infinity in Levinas”, *Levinas Studies: An Annual Review,* Volume 4, 2009, pp. 111–125. For the rest of my paper I adopt the spelling “Infinity” and “Infinite” whenever it unequivocally refers to absolute infinity or God.

16 Tengelyi points outs this connection in several of his works. On the mathematician Georg Cantor, whose assistant was Husserl, see László Tengelyi, *On Absolute Infinity in Cantor,* op.cit.

17 Cf. László Tengelyi, “*Experience and Infinity”,* op. cit.

18 On Cantor see László Tengelyi, “*On Absolute Infinity in Cantor”,* op. cit.

19 Henceforward referred to as *DI*.

20 *DI* II 1,97. For the critical text with English and German translation see http://www.cusanus-portal.de/ (accessed 17.03.2015.)

with absolute exactness. Creation based on matter is always and necessarily in potentiality, thus in principle it can be otherwise and its boundaries cannot be settled for good. However, God is positively Infinite: God's Transcendence cannot be defined and captured by finite concepts, precisely because God is Infinite.

Clearly, in this work Cusanus speaks as a thinker who is very much indebted to our Western metaphysical tradition. In book two of his *DI* his reasons for thinking the world otherwise and anew is a clear departure from fundamental medieval ideas, yet his thought—both in its methodology and content—is based on metaphysical speculation rather than on the anticipation of the experimental method of modern science.[21] In many respects, "*a new spirit, the spirit of Renaissance breathes in the work of Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa. His world is no longer the medieval cosmos. But it is not yet, by any means, the infinite universe of the moderns.*"[22]

One finds perhaps the most important phenomenological aspect of his thought in his reluctance to form an objectively valid representation of the universe.[23] For Nicholas the world-image of any given observer *(diversae imaginationes)* is made principally and fundamentally relative through his or her own place and movement within the universe, and as a consequence *"the world and its motion and shape cannot be apprehended."*[24] In is his own distinctive fashion Nicholas claims that the ancients did not arrive at these conclusions concerning the world, precisely because they lacked *learned ignorance (docta ignorantia)*.[25] Thus, philosophical humility in the form of self-reflection and constant awareness of the limitation of one's own thinking appears here as a possible link to modern phenomenology.

3.2. De visione Dei (1453)

I have no intention of pressing the previous point too far. Since the *DI* is undoubtedly a very speculative text, in order to make a more suitable connection to phenomenology it is advisable to take other Cusanian works into consideration. The *De visione Dei* presents itself as a particularly good choice, because its speculative content is explicitly rooted in personal experience.[26] This work was written for a Benedictine community, at Saint Quirinus Abbey, Tegernsee, in Bavaria. It is an intellectual introduction to mystical theology. In Cusanian terminology it is a *manuductio:* this term emphasizes the *anagogic* function of knowledge.[27] Cusanus originally attached a painting of an omnivoyant face, one that he calls *a picture of Infinity (figura infinitatis)*, to his manuscript in order that the monks' meditation could start with the experience of actually looking at this painting.[28]

The *DVD* can be read as an analysis of the intuitive knowledge presupposed by Infinity. Our knowledge of the Infinite is *paradoxical*: Infinity can only exist *unconditionally*, but our access to it is necessarily *conditional*. This is the paradox Cusanus wrestles with. The paradox is essentialy connected to a point highlighted by medieval knowledge: one may see the invisible within and

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21 On Nicholas' cosmology see Alexandre Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968) pp. 5–24.

22 Ibid., pp. 23–24.

23 Cf. ibid., p. 16.

24 *DI* II 11, 161:12-13: *"vides mundum et eius motum atque figuram attingi non posse"*, translation from Hopkins, see http://www.cusanus-portal.de/ (accessed 121.03.2015.)

25 *DI* II 12, 162:3-4: *"Ad ista iam dicta veteres non attigerunt, quia in docta ignorantia defecerunt."*

26 The title of this book refers both to the *vision whose subject is God (genitivus subjectivus: God's seeing,)* and the *vision aiming at God (genitivus objectivus: seeing God)*. Henceforth I shall refer to this work as *DVD*. For the Latin text with English translation see Jasper Hopkins (transl. and ed.), *Nicholas of Cusa's Dialectical Mysticism. Text, Translation and Interpretative Study of De Visione Dei* (Minneapolis: Banning, 1988²).

27 On the term and Nicholas' *manuductive* concern see the successive examination of such important Cusanian works as *De docta ignorantia, De coniecturis, De visione dei, De deo abscondito, De possest* and *De Non-Aliud* in Gergely Bakos, *Faith, Rationality,* op.cit. pp. 149–196.

28 This starting point is not only *phenomenological*, but it also brings the *DVD* into close proximity to *philosophical praxis*.

through the visible, one may grasp the Infinite in the finite.[29] The twentieth century French phenomenologist, Marion in his own works on painting raises a similar question: *How to be a theologian and remain a phenomenologist at the same time? That is to ask how to steer a safe course between the Scylla of a non-phenomenological metaphysics and the Charybdis of a phenomenology of mere immanence?*[30]

Generally, for medievals the *visio Dei* in question was not understood as a sort of (para)psychological experience in the first place. For Cusanus himself it can be certainly realized in the experience of thinking. If he can be called a mystical thinker, his mysticism is an intellectual one. In his thought as *manuductio* Cusanus leads the believer from the sensible to the intelligible, and from the intelligible to the unfathomable mystery of the Godhead.[31] As he himself says in his Prologue to the *DVD:*

> ”I will attempt to lead you–by way of experiencing and through a very simply and common means–into most sacred darkness. Upon arriving there each of you [...] will approach even nearer.”[32]

Cusanus' emphasis on experience *(experiamentaliter)* and on the sobriety of his own reflection *(simplicissimo atque communissimo modo)* already reveals a certain affinity with phenomenology. However, this is only the reader's starting point towards the sacred darkness *(sacratissima obscuritas)* of the Divinity, that is to say, towards a mystical vision of the Divine. The lines quoted from the Prologue also intimate that the intellectual path offered towards God will still be a path of (intellectual) desire.

The title of Chapter 13 makes clear that *“God is seen to be absolute infinity.”*[33] Seeing this infinite cannot be an ordinary way of seeing for the finite subject, since God clearly stands beyond all visible objects.[34] Yet, on the other hand, God's transcendence as Infinity cannot be a mere transcendent transcendence. Necessarily, Infinity does have a connection to the finite, to every aspect of finite being.[35] As Cusanus explains:

> ”I see that You are Infinity itself. And so, there is not anything that is other than you or different from You or opposed to You. For Infinity is not compatible with otherness, because there is not anything outside it, since it is Infinity. For Absolute Infinity includes and encompasses all things. And so, if there were ”Infinity” and something outside it,

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29 Cf. Jos Decorte, “Sapientia: Between Superbia and Vanitas”, in Stephen F. Brown (ed.), *Meeting of the Minds. The Relations between Mediaeval and Classical Modern European Philosophy* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998) pp. 477–506; Id., *Eine kurze Geschichte der mittelalterlichen Philosophie* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2006) pp. 12–18; Id., “Geschichte und Eschatologie. Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das mittelalterliche Leben”, in Jan Aertsen, Martin Pickavé (eds.), *Ende und Vollendung: Eschatologische Perspektiven im Mittelalter* (Berlin: de Guyter, 2002) pp. 150–161.
See also Gergely Bakos, *On Faith, Rationality,* op. cit. pp. 3–29. For the biblical origins of *visio Dei* see *Romans* 1:19-20; 1 *Corinthians* 13:9–12 and *the Gospel according to John*.

30 Cf. Jean-Luc Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible* (California: Stanford University Press, 2005)

31 Jos Decorte, “Ter inleiding”, in Jos Lievens (transl.), *Nicolaas van Cusa: Godsdienstvrede* (Kapellen: Pelckmans, 2000) pp. 7–46, here p. 36.

32 *DVD* Prologue 1:8-10.

33 *DVD* 13, 52:2: *”Quod Deus videtur absoluta infinitas.”*

34 Cf. ibid. 52:4-5: *„nescio quid video, quia nihil visibilium video. Et hoc scio solum, quia scio nescire quid video et numquam scire posse.”*

35 Bence Marosán drew my attention to the fact that the existence of Evil and pantheism pose a problem to Cusanus' position. It should be noted, however, that Nicholas is denying neither God's free creative act nor the work of salvation. As regards pantheism, he actually faced its charge already in his lifetime. Yet, in his works there is no trace of a necessary relation from God towards the world in the sense of a deterministic causation or emanation. Infinity's relation to the finite is necessarily intimate, but still free and in no way fully deterministic. This is especially clear with respect to human creativity.

there would be neither Infinity nor anything else. [...] if the Infinite is removed, nothing remains."[36]

Consequently, the human subject, precisely as a finite being, has a necessary connection to Infinity. Before coming to know any finite *alterity (alteritas)* or *other (aliud)*, the Infinite must be posited or rather it posits itself.

For Cusanus *alteritas* or *aliud* are relative terms, since the otherness they refer to comes from non-being. Clearly, this kind concept of Otherness is not a positive principle *(principium positivum)*, while Infinity is. To this Infinity nothing is other or alien. Infinity is not limited by anything else, i.e. by anything finite. It is not difficult to see the consequence of this position in a radically *negative theology:* Infinity has no proper name, since all names presuppose finite reality, otherness, difference and limitation.[37] Yet, on the other hand, because nothing is alien or other to Infinity, it can still be approached from within finitude.

3.3. De directio speculantis seu de li Non Aliud

However distant the Cusanian employment of the concept of otherness may present itself to contemporary phenomenology, in this respect it is worthwhile to look at another Cusanian *manuductio* under the title *On God as Non-Other*.[38] This text was completed before January 18th in 1462, just a few years before Nicholas' death. This late work is explicitly Dionysian. It identifies God as the Non-Other *(li Non Aliud)*. In clear contrast to Levinas, for Nicholas Non-Other does refer to God's transcendence, or to be more precise, to God's transcendence and immanence at the same time. One can say that God as Infinite has both a negative and a positive dimension.[39] Again, it should be noted that while Cusanus takes Divine transcendence rather seriously, God's immanence opens up epistemological possibilities for the human subject. I shall look at this issue more closely in the next section.

4. Towards a Phenomenological Overview of the Cusanian Project

With respect to Cusanus and phenomenological philosophy there are at least three basic points to be considered.[40]

4.1. The absolute is ultimately beyond human knowledge.

After Husserl's famous dictum *"The infinite is not a phenomenon."* this can be hardly disputed. This is an obvious and rather important point of agreement between Nicholas and the phenomenological tradition. Perhaps, this should not come as a surprise, since numerous thinkers from the

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36 Ibid. 56:1-6.10.

37 Cf. *DVD* 13, 52:12-14; and 14, 60:3-5.

38 For the Latin text with English translation see Jasper Hopkins (transl.), *Nicholas of Cusa on God as Not–Other. A Translation and an Appraisal of De Li Non Aliud* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979)

39 If I understand Balázs Mezei's criticism of Levinas rightly, the problem with Levinasian infinite lies precisely in its limited nature. This squares well with the Cusanian position that thinks infinity as not-other.

40 These points are taken from Dethlef Thiel, "Nicolaus of Cusa (1401–1464). Squaring the Circle: Politics, Piety, and Rationality", in Paul Richard Blum (ed.), *Philosophies of the Renaissance* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010) pp. 43–56. However, Thiel's essay makes no manifest connection to phenomenology.

phenomenological tradition could appreciate aspects of negative or mystical theology–a tradition Nicholas is consciously inscribing his entire oeuvre into.[41]

4.2. Human knowledge is necessarily provisional or asymptotic.

Negatively, this is a reminder of our human limitations or—to employ a medieval term—of *humility (humilitas)*. To express the same point positively one can say that it opens up an infinite horizon for endless investigation. Again and rather obviously the same basic structure presents itself in phenomenological philosophy: an infinite field of possible research shown in the manifold new "phenomenologies", but notably also *a phenomenological philosophy of religion*.

4.3. Human knowledge has an analogical or manuductive function.

Admittedly, at least at first sight this third point seems to be problematic from a phenomenological perspective.[42] However, I maintain that precisely a phenomenological description of the actual functioning of religious texts, concepts, symbols, actions, etc. could profit a lot from the Cusanian *manuductiones*.[43]

Here it is perhaps worthwhile to remind the reader of the necessary starting point both of phenomenology and Cusanian thought: the perspective of the first person singular. As it has been shown, Nicholas' *DVD* begins with the experience of an omnivoyant face and goes on to discuss how one should approach it and how each monk ought to take into account of the experience of the others in this exercise. In this way (inter-)subjective experience forms the starting point of this speculative work.[44]

On the other hand, while considering Nicholas' manuductive concern, the symbolic structure of medieval, indeed of all religious knowledge should also be kept in mind. According to this structure (S – X – Y), for the finite subject (S) the visible (X) points toward an invisible (Y). Note that X is only a *similitudo* of Y, that is to say X is both similar and dissimilar to Y at the same time. Consequently, God will always remain a hidden God *(deus absconditus)*. The presence of Y can only be *a presence in absence*. This *symbolic absence* of the absolute is at once its *symbolic presence* – and *vice versa*.[45]

This can hardly be called a *metaphysics of presence*, but more rightly a *metaphysics of a presence in absence*. To employ a German term one can say that it is a *Zusammenspiel* of presence and absence. Moreover, the same basic moment of *(dis)similarity* and thus *presence-in-absence* also structures the following *phenomena*: humor, the ethical, human relationships and art. In this respect one can be reminded of the so called *"theological turn"* in French phenomenology: especially

41 Cf., for example, Bettina Bergo, *Emmanuel Levinas,* op.cit.: *"Levinas stands, minimally, within the negative 'theological' tradition inaugurated by Maimonides; more acutely, perhaps, because Levinas's task is not so much to reconcile Judaism and Aristotelianism, as it is to describe phenomenologically the indescribable: breaking out of totality and Being."* As regards negative or mystical theology similar connections can be pointed out on Derrida's, Heidegger's and Marion's behalf.

42 Cf. László Tengelyi, *Welt und Unendlichkeit,* op.cit., p. 548. See the quotation in section 2 of my paper, cf. footnote 8.

43 Examples from the *DVD* are the omnivoyant face, the mirror, the painter, the wall of Paradise. For an analysis of some of these, see Gergely Tibor Bakos, "The Mirror, the Painter and Infinity. Images and Concepts in the Manuductive Strategy of De visione Dei", in Inigo Bocken, Harald Schwaetzer (eds.), *Spiegel und Porträt. Zur Bedeutung zweier zentraler Bilder im Denken des Nicolas Cusanus* (Maastricht: Shaker, 2005) pp. 231–246.

44 Cf. *DVD* Prologue, 2:1–5.

45 My understanding of the symbolic structure comes from Jos Decorte, *Raak me niet aan,* Kapellen: Pelckmans, 2001. The nuanced concept of a metaphysics of a presence in absence I also owe to Decorte.

Levinas on beyond Being (ethic, human relationships) and Marion on icons (art).[46] Bearing in mind Tengelyi's own phenomenological project, one is reminded of diacritic difference, that is to say a *difference with connection*.

Diacritic phenomenology for Tengelyi also means that one can never understand experience as it were from the outside. To put it with Levinas, there is no possibility of a panoramic, totalizing vision. I think, Cusanus would basically agree: the human subject is not in a position to form a total, objective, scientific picture of the world—let alone of God.

A further basic factor of diacritic difference, namely *temporality* may need another essay.[47] Yet, Cusanus's whole oeuvre testifies to his awareness of the fundamentally provisional character of our human knowledge. Phenomenologically speaking any awareness of a provisional dimension necessarily includes—even if only in an implicit manner—an awareness of temporality, i.e. of the passage of time. Notably, Nicholas never built a closed system of thought, instead he made fresh starts with every one of his books. Thus if Tengelyi's work can be characterized as a *practice of diacritic phenomenology*, I suggest that Nicholas's might just as well be called a *diacritic practice of (mystical) theology*. This is not meant as a definite statement on the issue at hand, rather as an invitation to a further investigation and deeper comparison of phenomenology and Cusanian thought.

5. Towards the humility of philosophy and the philosophy of humility

Although famously and fiercely criticized by Friedrich Nietzsche, humility appears as a deeply valued virtue not only in most religious traditions but notably also in Kantian moral philosophy. In the form of modesty it is still to be recommended. I maintain that the entire phenomenological movement has been aiming to achieve excellence in this virtue in its constant effort to understand our human condition.[48]

Although different in form and content, and most fundamentally in its inspiration, medieval humility runs a parallel course—certainly it did so for Nicholas of Cusa. If one is bold enough to combine these two concerns, that is to say the consequent intellectual modesty of phenomenology and Cusanian *humilitas*, this endeavor does not appear as a sign of intellectual *hybris*, but on the contrary it aims at a deeper realization of both.

In this respect medieval examples of vision can certainly help us further. Rogier van der Weyden (1400–1464) was a medieval painter also mentioned by Cusanus in the *DVD*.[49] One of his works, the central panel of the so called *Braque Family Triptych* painted around 1450 shows the figure of

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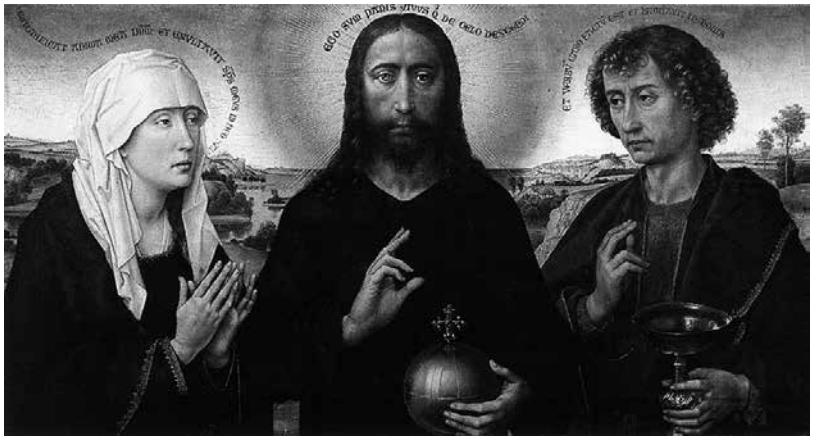
46 It is still to be seen to what extent Bettina Bergo's following evaluation should be qualified: *"The hyperbolic language of* Otherwise than Being *would have us 'sense' the excess of what he means to express—and its limit. This is not allegory; that is, it is not the signification, born of a Christian reading of the Bible, of higher realities hidden under everyday objects and events. It is almost the contrary: signification has its incipience in transcendence; transcendence is the intersubjective quality of sensibility."* (Id., *Emmanuel Levinas,* op.cit.) In my view, the right understanding of the problem depends upon the exact nature of allegory. Without going into a detailed discussion here, it can be simply stated that symbols always suggest an ever possible surplus of meaning.

47 Cf. László Tengelyi, "The Wild Region in Life-History", op. cit., p. xxix: *"a diacritical difference becomes manifest only in a temporal shift."*

48 Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* op. cit., pp. xvi-xvii: *"The world is not what I think, but what I live through. I am open to the world, I have no doubt that I am in communication with it; I do not possess it; it is inexhaustible."* These words do not only ring with true intellectual modesty, but they also shed light on the essential connection between humility and the perception of infinity.

See also ibid. p. xiv: *"The most important lesson of which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction."*; and p. xii: *"I discover within myself a kind of internal weakness standing in the way of my totally individualized: a weakness which exposes me to the gaze of others as a man among men or at least as a consciousness among consciousnesses."*

49 *DVD Prologue* 2:8-9.



an omnivoyant Christ flanked by the Blessed Virgin and John the Baptist.[50] This painting is a clear testimony of Christian faith and a strong reminder that the vision aimed at by the medieval intellectual is embraced by a Divine vision—themes central to Nicholas' *DVD*.

Yet, as Cusanus also makes clear, the spectacle of omnivoyance is far from being limited to the strictly religious or the theological. In the *DVD* Nicholas reminds his Benedictine readership of the many existing instances of such images—i.e. the archer in the forum at Nuremberg, a face in the city hall of Brussels, Veronica at his own chapel at Coblenz and the angel holding the emblems of the church in his castle at Bressanone.[51]

Thus it should not come as a surprise that another work by the hands of the same Rogier – entitled the *Portrait of a Young Woman* or *Lady Wearing a Gauze Headdress,* completed between 1435–1440 – likewise gives testimony to the popularity such images were enjoying in the Middle Ages.[52] While the face of the omnivoyant Christ may stand symbolically for medieval—and a fortiori for Cusanian—*visio Dei*, the young lady depicted by the Flemish painter may just as well be a symbol of our phenomenological concern for the human Other.

In concluding his posthumous work on *phenomenological metaphysics*, László Tengelyi expresses—albeit somewhat tentatively—the following philosophical conviction: *"ultimately, every human relationship with the Divine grows out of the awareness of the infinity of the world."*[53] New phenomenology demonstrates that serious philosophical reflection on infinity brings us back to the trinity of classical metaphysics, Christian Wolff's *metaphysische Trinität*. Yet, undoubtedly, each member of this metaphysical trinity is seen now in a different and new light than before—thanks to phenomenological awareness. It appears that the world, God and the human Other—these fundamental concepts are not only passing moments of the Western metaphysical tradition still haunting our thinking, but they will continue to confront and challenge phenomenological philosophy as well. Cusanus and Tengelyi offer us a rich soil out of which our own efforts at understanding these concepts could grow.

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50 Presently on permanent display at the *Louvre,* in Paris, France. Cf. http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/w/weyden/rogier/10braque/index.html (accessed 21.11.2015.) I am grateful to my friend, Zoltán Csordás for helping me to track down this picture and identify its artist and also for the correct interpretation of Rogier's paintings.

51 Cf. *DVD Prologue* 2:1-10. The list is not meant to be exhaustive as it is finished with the following close: *"et multae alie undique."*

52 Currently this picture is at the *Gemäldegarie,* in Berlin, Germany. Cf. http://www.wikiart.org/en/rogier-van-der-weyden/braque-family-triptych-1450#supersized-artistPaintings-187278 (accessed 18.11.2015)

53 László Tengelyi, *Welt und Unendlichkeit,* op. cit., p. 556: *"jedes Gottesverhältnis des Menschen letztlich aus der Wahrnehmung des Unendlichen der Welt auswächst."* As the previous page makes it clear, Tengelyi does not exclude the possibility of a theological reflection on this relationship.

For any such intellectual endeavor it is advisable to consider Jos Decorte's following reflection on the symbolic experience laid out above:

> "In this sort of experience man looks intently towards the horizon to make out roughly the outlines of the House [i.e. the House of the Father, a biblical image of the final mysterious goal of human existence]—being aware that this can never be wholly done, in truth, it may never be accomplished fully. While being aware of his finality, he certainly avoids the foolishness of pride and the nonsense of vanity and finds thus true wisdom: that of humility."[54]

This awareness—when achieved and sustained in our own philosophical practice—will be the true guarantee for *philosophical humilitas:* a deep concern connecting Cusanian and phenomenological thinking.[55] Only then could we venture into developing *a philosophy of humility*: we can start *reflecting philosophically* on the true *meaning of our humility*. It is my conviction, that ultimately, no phenomenology true to its name can be satisfied with anything less than that.

54 Jos Decorte, "Middeleeuwse en hedendaagse appreciatie van de liefdesmystiek", *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 63 (2001) pp. 543–68, here p. 567.

55 Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* op. cit., p. xxi: *"The unfinished nature of phenomenology and the inchoative atmosphere which has surrounded it are not to be taken as a sign of failure, they were inevitable because phenomenology's task was to reveal the mystery of the world and of reason."*